



Consumer Opinions Inform Part D National Program Plan

"The comprehensive planning process has given stakeholders an important role in informing OSEP on how IDEA Part D national activities can help improve results for children with disabilities."

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In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) launched a long-range, comprehensive planning process for Part D of the reauthorized 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. OSEP's goal for its Part D national program is to link best practices to states, school systems, and families to improve results for infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities. Part D of IDEA '97 authorizes national program activities and federal funding (see figure, this page).

OSEP undertook a significant initiative in implementing the Part D national program comprehensive planning process. Among the activities undertaken were:

- Solicit opinions about the Part D national program through mass distribution of a survey.

• Convene experts to identify issues in key program areas and make recommendations for how the Part D national program may address them.

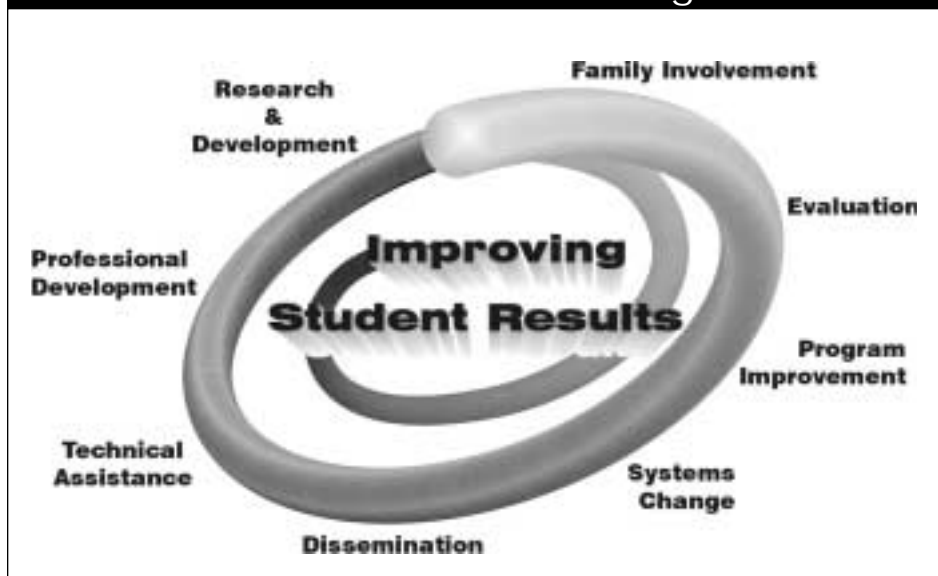
- Use recommendations from the opinion survey, panels, and other national and state sources to develop a five-year Part D national program plan.

Nationwide Outreach Effort Informs Program Directions

OSEP has a long history of involving stakeholders in its national programs and continually looks for new ways to guarantee that their opinions inform its planning efforts. Thus it is no surprise that OSEP began its Part D planning process by seeking the involvement of the broader education community—especially individuals with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, professionals in the fields of general and special education, members of national organizations, and representatives of various levels of government—to share their needs and issues related to improving results for students with disabilities.

Outreach began on May 14, 1999. Representatives from more than 40 national organizations whose members are drawn from the key Part D consumer groups joined OSEP in generating survey items and planning strategies for soliciting opinions from their constituents on how best to improve results for children with disabilities and their families. Information from this meeting was used to develop opinion surveys that were prepared

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in both written and web-based formats, as well as made available in Spanish. The national organizations helped distribute information about the survey. Advertisements were placed in major educational periodicals and newspapers, and press packets were sent to the media, educational projects, and parent centers.

The outreach effort enabled OSEP to reach out to thousands of individuals who were interested in education across the country. More than 14,900 consumers—defined as individuals with disabilities and their families, teachers, administrators, and others employed to work with children with disabilities and their families—completed the survey between April and September 2000.

What Do Consumers Think?

The viewpoints expressed across various groups—individuals with disabilities, teachers, related service providers, policy makers, and administrators—were similar and clear.

Improving the Lives of Children with Disabilities

Consumers reported that the lives of children with disabilities of all ages would be significantly improved if they could experience:

- Greater participation and success in the general education curriculum.
- Higher achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics.
- Greater participation in general education non-academic or extracurricular activities.
- Greater access to psycho-social or mental health services (for children who need these services).
- Greater access to information and support for themselves and their families.

In consumers' opinion, infants, toddlers, and preschool children with disabilities also need:

- Greater access to high-quality infant and toddler programs.
- Effective transition into and out of preschool.
- Greater access to quality health care for themselves and their families.

Similarly, consumers noted that high school-aged and older youth with disabilities require:

- Greater participation in high school transition programs that include community-based work experience as well as college preparation and college mentoring programs
- Higher rates of high school completion.
- Higher rates of participation after high school in vocational training, community college, and college programs.
- Greater access to employment support and assistance.

Improving Service Delivery and Performance

Consumers believe that improved results for children with disabilities and their families are linked to the provision of appropriate services and the adequate performance of a broad service delivery system. Consumers identified the most overwhelming improvements needed in service provision and performance as:

- More and better qualified professionals (e.g., teachers, therapists, and other), paraprofessionals and assistants to serve infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities.
- Smaller class sizes or case loads of professionals serving children with disabilities.
- Better identification of infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities or those who are at risk for developing a disability.

- Effective collaboration between general and special education and between professionals and individuals with disabilities and their families.
- Better understanding of the requirements of federal legislation regarding the rights of individuals with disabilities and their families (i.e., IDEA, ADA, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973).

Next Steps

OSEP staff members are currently discussing the implications of consumers' opinions. The results of the opinion survey, along with the panels' findings and other relevant planning information—such as the findings of Parts B and C monitoring and oversight efforts and State Improvement Grant Program proposals, as required under Part D, Subpart 2 of IDEA—are being integrated by agency-wide staff workgroups into a comprehensive Part D national program plan. Once analyses are complete, the agency will map long-term research-to-practice strategies in each of the five broad Part D planning areas.

The public will be invited to comment on the Part D national program plan before it is presented to Congress for approval. ■

**The comprehensive planning process is authorized by IDEA [sec. 661(1)].*

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